

Diesel spill in West Virginia leaves 12,000 without water

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About 12,000 people in southeastern West Virginia were left without drinking water after a diesel spill over the weekend. Trucks have been dispatched to provide bulk water to residents of an affected area spanning over 20 miles, from the communities of Renick to Ronceverte, including Frankford, Fairlea, and the City of Lewisburg.

A tanker truck hauling about 7,500 gallons of diesel fuel overturned late Friday night on Route 92, north of Lewisburg in Greenbrier County, West Virginia. Nearly 4,000 gallons of fuel were dumped into the soil and Anthony Creek, a tributary of the Greenbrier River, which serves as a water source for Lewisburg and surrounding areas.

Officials from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the National Guard, the West Virginia Bureau of Public Health and other state and local agencies were at the scene of the accident. Cleanup operations, however, have been slowed due to inclement weather and poor road conditions.

Lewisburg officials closed the city's water intake early Saturday morning, prior to the spill's arrival, to prevent the contamination of the distribution system. Customers of the Lewisburg Municipal Water System were warned that the system was operating on reserves and asked to restrict water usage to critical functions. The systems and its reserves ran dry around 3 pm on Sunday.

Schools, restaurants, hotels, and other businesses were ordered closed by the health department unless they provided alternate water plans. The Greenbrier Valley Medical Center cancelled elective surgeries and procedures and has enacted water conservation measures.

The water department turned on the water intakes late Monday after the health department certified tests

showing diesel at non-detectable levels. However, the distribution system, with its 135 miles of water mains, has been run dry and it is expected to take up to three days before it is re-pressurized. Residents are under a boil-water advisory for three days after water is restored.

So far no fish kills have been reported, but officials worry about the environmental impact of the spill. Anthony Creek is a popular stream for trout fishing and flows through the Monongahela National Forest before entering the Greenbrier.

Chemical spills and leaks are endemic throughout the US, threatening the health and safety of the population and the quality of the environment. Last week, 40,000 gallons of crude oil were released into the Yellowstone River in Montana from a leaking pipeline forcing some 6,000 residents to rely on bottled water for five days.

In West Virginia, thousands of chemical leaks into the state's water are reported every year, according to the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). However, as the *Charleston Gazette* has noted, "DEP inspectors check into each report the agency gets, but the DEP doesn't keep track of inspector findings in a way that would let anyone know how big each reported spill turned out to be—or what caused it, or whether there was any enforcement action taken, or if precautions were implemented to prevent a recurrence."

Friday's accident is the second fuel leak into the Greenbrier in the past year. Last July, a tanker truck carrying 7,800 gallons of diesel overturned and caught fire on a bridge in Bartow, dumping fuel directly into the river.

Just over a year ago, a chemical leak on the Elk River in the state's capital, Charleston, poisoned the water supply for 300,000 residents after it reached the

regional treatment and distribution plant intake. A state of emergency was declared in nine counties, and a ban of tap water usage remained in effect for more than a week in some areas. Hundreds of residents were treated for nausea, skin burns and eye irritation from contact with the spilled coal-cleaning agent MCHM.

Last month federal prosecutors charged the now-bankrupt Freedom Industries, the company responsible for the 2014 leak, and several of its leading executives, with violations of the Clean Water Act.

“Freedom and its officers and agents, including responsible corporate officers, failed to exercise reasonable care in its duty to operate the Etowah Facility in a safe and environmentally-sound manner, in that it failed to comply with applicable law, regulations, and guidelines; failed to follow its own internal operating procedures; and failed to conform to common industry standards for safety and environmental compliance,” the indictment claimed.

Rarely, if ever, are chemical spills and leaks simply accidents. They take place within a definite social context and are the product of neglected and often inadequate infrastructure coupled with reckless operation in the pursuit of profit.



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